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More than a Cultural Celebration: The Politics of Chinese New Year in Post-Suharto Indonesia

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Abstract: In the aftermath of the May 1998 riots that forced President Suharto to step down, ethnic Chinese received unprecedented freedom to assert their long suppressed cultural and religious identity. Following the transition from assimilation to multiculturalism, for the first time in over three decades Chinese culture became more visible and ethnic Chinese could finally enjoy the freedom to celebrate Chinese New Year (Imlek) publicly. This article focuses on the politics of the re-emergent Chinese New Year celebration in the Indonesian public sphere. It demonstrates the significance of Imlek as an ethnic symbol to Chinese-Indonesians. Borrowing Hobsbawm's concept of "invented tradition", the article critically examines how the festival has been reinvented, represented, commodified, and consumed by both Chinese and non-Chinese-Indonesians in the cultural, political and religious contexts of contemporary Indonesia.

Introduction¹

Two days before Chinese New Year, the largest newspaper in Indonesia reported that businesses in the Chinatown area in Jakarta had run out of stocks for their red lanterns and "Shanghai" costumes (read: *cheongsam*) ("Jelang" 2008). Chinese New Year (known as "Imlek" in Indonesia) is a time for colourful parades featuring dances by lions and other puppets, and performances of Chinese folk rituals on the streets and in Chinese temples. Decorations and ornaments in the lucky colour red, representing Chineseness, along with Chinese cultural performances like the dragon and lion dances have become products of mass consumption in post-Suharto Indonesia. Major shopping malls decorate their interior with red lanterns and gigantic *angpao*, the red envelopes used for gifts of money. TV shows adopt Imlek themes, ranging from game shows where audiences dress in traditional Chinese costumes to talk shows featuring Chinese *feng shui* and fortune telling.

Such public displays of Chineseness were not possible during President Suharto's New Order regime (1966-1998), which implemented a military-backed assimilation policy for managing the nation's Chinese minority. After Suharto's fall in 1998, Indonesia underwent a process of reformation and democratization. Under President Abdurrahman Wahid's administration (1999-2001), ethnic Chinese² were given greater freedom to assert their cultural and religious identities. President Wahid annulled the New Order discriminatory regulation—Presidential Decree No. 14/1967—which had repressed any manifestation of Chinese beliefs, customs and traditions and prohibited the public celebration of Chinese religious and cultural festivals, such as Imlek and the lion or dragon dance. This official move assured the ethnic Chinese of their right to observe their cultural practices in the same way that other ethnic groups enjoyed theirs.

Following the transition from assimilation to multiculturalism, for the first time in over three decades Chinese culture became more visible and ethnic Chinese could finally enjoy the unrestricted freedom to celebrate Imlek publicly. In January 2001, President Wahid went a step further, making Imlek an optional holiday. A year later, President Megawati declared Imlek a national holiday beginning in 2003. This edict was a landmark decision

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² The terms "ethnic Chinese" and "Chinese-Indonesian" are used interchangeably to refer to Indonesians of Chinese descent.

and a further restoration of the cultural rights of the ethnic Chinese. Many ethnic Chinese responded by utilizing the atmosphere of pluralism and multiculturalism to articulate their identity and liberate their long-suppressed cultural heritage. Consequently, Indonesia witnessed a “resurgence” of Chinese culture and identity in language, religion, media, and politics, as well as in cultural symbols and practices (Hoon 2008).³

This article focuses on the politics of the re-emergent Chinese New Year celebration in the Indonesian public sphere.⁴ It demonstrates the significance of Imlek as an ethnic symbol to Chinese-Indonesians, even though some of them do not understand the historical origin and cultural meanings of the festival. Borrowing Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition” (1983)⁵, this article also critically examines how the festival has been reinvented, represented, commodified, and consumed by both Chinese and non-Chinese-Indonesians in the cultural, political and religious contexts of contemporary Indonesia.

A Symbolic Festival

After more than three decades of forced assimilation, most ethnic Chinese below the age of 60 have lost familiarity with Chinese culture and traditions, including even the ability to speak and write in the Chinese language. Suryadinata (2007) argues that the ethnic Chinese became gradually Indonesianized after the “three pillars” of Chinese cultures—namely Chinese schools, Chinese organizations and Chinese media—were closed down in 1966. Nevertheless, despite the systematic erasure of Chinese identity by the New Order, certain Chinese traditions did seem to survive and persist, albeit transformed in their manifestations. However limited such manifestations were, I have argued elsewhere that some Chinese did exercise agency in preserving and maintaining Chinese traditions, language and culture to prevent them from disappearing in New Order Indonesia (Hoon 2008, 53-56). This was done behind the walls of their homes, in Buddhist temples (*vihara*) or churches, and through unregistered or disguised Chinese organizations. The Imlek festival represents one of the few Chinese cultural traditions that persisted throughout and survived the onslaught of Suharto’s iron fist, despite being repackaged and commodified.

Many assimilated Chinese-Indonesians find these new cultural expressions unfamiliar, if not foreign. But, notwithstanding their lack of knowledge about the rituals and practices carried out in the festival, they have embraced Imlek. To them, it is both an acknowledgement of their long suppressed identity and a symbol of new opportunities for freedom of expression. Imlek is also often seen by ethnic Chinese as a quintessential tradition that defines their ethnicity. Although this article takes a non-essentialist position in its approach, it acknowledges that primordialism in ethnicity does not necessarily mean an abandonment of the idea of ethnicity as situational and flexible. Tong and Chan argue that “ethnicity is both primordial and situational, not either or” (2001, 35). According to Brubaker et al (2004, 52),

primordialist and circumstantialist accounts need not be mutually exclusive. The former can help explain the seemingly universal tendency to naturalize and

³ Nevertheless, this “resurgence” needs to be read in the wider context of the recent economic rise of China and its ramifications for the Southeast Asian region. As Wei Djao argued: “The national dignity regained by PRC [in recent decades] led to greater respect for the Chinese overseas in various countries” (2002, 366). A new interest in Mandarin and Chinese culture is also common among the ethnic Chinese (and, to some extent, the non-Chinese) in other parts of Southeast Asia.

⁴ This paper draws its primary sources from interviews with Chinese-Indonesian and *pribumi* informants conducted by the author in 2004 in Jakarta for a larger project on Chinese identity in post-Suharto Indonesia (see Hoon 2008).

⁵ Hobsbawm (1983, 1) argues that, “‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are quite often recent in origin and sometimes invented.... ‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature...which automatically implies continuity with the past”.

essentialize real or imputed human differences, while the latter can help explain how ethnicity becomes relevant or salient in particular contexts.

We have to be alert to the fact that the primordial aspect of ethnicity is by no means “natural”; as Hobsbawm (1983) reminds us, traditions can indeed be invented. The invention of primordial Chinese traditions is dependent upon the particular historical and social nodes of the community concerned. In this sense, Chinese “traditions” that are maintained by Chinese in Indonesia may be different from Chinese in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Fiji, or indeed China.

For instance, most of my young Chinese informants said that they would like the next generation to have Chinese names, although most did not speak or write Chinese on a daily basis. Some of them do not even have a Chinese name themselves, or, if they did, they rarely used it. Yet they said that they would ask their parents, grandparents or other elderly relatives who know Chinese to grant their children Chinese names so that at least their children would not forget their “roots”. Besides that, they also revealed that they celebrate Imlek and observe the “dos and don’ts” related to this festival, even though they do not always understand the historical origin of such practices. Nevertheless, Mely Tan (1995, 23) argues that,

...for many of the younger generation, especially those who have become Protestants or Catholics, and the smaller proportion who have become Muslims, these festivals and traditions have lost their religious meaning or even their meaning as a part of Chinese tradition. What remain are the social and familial aspects of honouring parents and older relatives and visiting and paying respects on Chinese lunar new year’s day (especially if grandparents are still around); in fact, even this event has, for some, become simply an occasion for wearing nice clothes and partying.

As this shows, for the younger generation the meaning of Imlek has changed. In spite of this, my informants insisted that they want to continue to practise these “traditions”, because they are the very few practices that give material meaning to their Chineseness.

To understand how Imlek, as an ethnic symbol, is significant to the persistence of an ethnic group, I refer to Herbert Gans’ (1979, 1) notion of “symbolic ethnicity”. Gans writes: “ethnics do not need either ethnic cultures or organizations; instead, they resort to the use of ethnic symbols. As a result, ethnicity may be turning into symbolic ethnicity, an ethnicity of last resort, which could, nevertheless, persist for generations”. Gans explains that traditional ethnic cultures may not be relevant to the third (or later) generation who lack experiential knowledge and ties to the “homeland” of their ancestors (ibid, 6). Since most members of this generation have lost touch with their cultural roots, if they wish to articulate their ethnic identity they will have to express aspects of their ethnic culture more explicitly than the forefathers who were able to authenticate their cultural practices through either imaginary or real ties with the “homeland” (ibid, 8). Consequently, this generation resorts to ethnic symbols, which Gans defines as “individual cultural practices which are taken from the older ethnic culture; they are ‘abstracted’ from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it” (ibid, 9). Lastly, Gans asserts that people who desire to return to the imagined pasts, “which are conveniently cleansed of the complexities that accompanied them in the real past”, may attempt to “recreate a tradition, or rather, create a symbolic tradition” to serve such purpose (ibid).

Gans’ theory is relevant to the case of Indonesian ethnic Chinese, especially if we consider Imlek as an ethnic symbol. In fact, Imlek in post-Suharto Indonesia has become a symbolic festival recreated and maintained by ethnic Chinese based on an imagined

tradition, as will be explained in later sections. To many Chinese-Indonesians, Imlek “is an acknowledgement of their cultural identity. Through celebrating Imlek, an ethnic Chinese can feel belonging to the ethnicity” (“Imlek” 2000, 8). As one young Chinese-Indonesian university student states, “Imlek is important because it represents the cultural essence of being Chinese. A person’s Chineseness can only persist with the celebration of Imlek” (ibid). Perhaps the significance of Imlek as an ethnic symbol can be attributed to the fact that the majority of Indonesian-born Chinese have little or no Chinese language ability. This linguistic incompetence may have played a part in determining the expressions of “symbolic ethnicity” (such as the visible markers of sartorial “Chineseness” like cheongsam, skullcap and pigtail, etc) that appear on Indonesian television during the Chinese New Year. Their minimal linguistic and cultural knowledge, together with the ubiquity of the commodification of Chinese culture, make such clichéd representations of Chineseness the norm, as they may be all that are left to most ethnic Chinese in Indonesia to assert and represent their identity.

Nevertheless, while this ethnic symbol gives material meaning to the Chinese-Indonesian identity and enables their sense of ethnicity to persist, it seems unlikely that Chinese in Indonesia will turn into merely a “symbolic ethnicity”. This is because there is now a new space for the re-articulation of Chineseness brought about by the fall of Suharto, the rise of China, and the relative ease of re-connecting with China through popular culture, travel, etc. that is enabled by globalization. The new younger generation of Chinese-Indonesians raised in the Reformasi era is now able to study Mandarin in schools, consume Chinese cultural products and express a different Chinese identity compared to the previous generation. If such resinicization continues to take place, in a few decades, the need to define ethnicity using ethnic symbol like Imlek may diminish.

A Commodified Festival

In his research on Christmas in China, Gary Sigley (2007, 91) argues that “rather than viewing it through the grid of religion, we should read Christmas in China as a manifestation of China’s increasing integration into a global consumer economy that will have far-reaching political economic, and cultural implications”. Similarly, this article suggests that Imlek in Indonesia can equally be read in a wider context, as a local example of a global festival celebrated by ethnic Chinese worldwide but now characterized by consumption and commodified by capitalism.

In support of this analysis, we see that Imlek has become increasingly commercialized, especially in big cities like Jakarta. “Chineseness” has become another commodity on display in major shopping malls in Jakarta. In 2006 I even observed Chinese New Year banners displayed in “national” and neutral spaces such as the check-in counter at the Sukarno-Hatta International Airport in Jakarta. As Heryanto (2004) argues:⁶

Like Christmas and Idul Fitri, Imlek has become a profit-making opportunity for the capitalist entertainment industry. *Kue Keranjang* (a special cake served during Chinese New Year) and *barongsai* (lion dance) are increasingly becoming like *capcay* (chop suey), Nokia mobile phones, Kodak cameras, Hollywood films, or the Google Internet search engine. In the capitalist market, they are distributed as commodities that cross the boundaries of race, gender, or religion.

In regard to the commodification of Imlek, Budianta (2007, 174) also notes:

⁶ Author’s translation.

[A]s Chineseness is absorbed into the market, it becomes a part of urban life style. Sending Gong Xi Fa Cai (Happy Chinese New Year) SMSs to friends has become a trend. Hypermarkets and malls make a marketing opportunity of Chinese New Year as they do with Christmas and the Muslim Id holiday (a commoditization of culture that some call *malticulturalism*). The popularity of Taiwanese TV series and popular music has made things Chinese agreeable to national youth culture.

Furthermore, television shows about or related to “Chineseness”—like *feng shui*, *barongsai* (lion dance), Chinese astrology, and *sinetron* (soap operas) about Chinese-Indonesians—appear on most private television channels during the festive season.

Some Chinese-Indonesians applauded the freedom of expression surrounding Imlek as an opportunity for *pribumi* (native Indonesians) to learn about Chinese culture. For instance, one female Chinese informant stated:

[The expressions of Imlek and lion dance are] good. From watching these, the *pribumi* can know about Chinese culture. Like now on TV, many *pribumi* artists learn to sing Mandarin songs even though their tones are all wrong. But [at least] they have the intention of opening themselves up to Chinese culture. In the past, they would have dismissed Chinese culture altogether.... (interview, 15/04/2004).

Chou (2002) has documented the “excitement” experienced by *pribumi* during an Imlek parade in Solo:⁷

Along the street, many children and ‘*pribumi*’ citizens watched and applauded. From their facial and bodily expressions, I knew they were happy to watch this attraction which they were seeing for the first time. I noticed, every time the lion or dragon [dancers] showed off, the [pribumi audience] screamed [and] clapped their hands loudly ... as if they didn’t care if this foreign culture originated from China or elsewhere, and didn’t ask if Chinese culture would impede ‘assimilation’, or damage national integration. They also didn’t ask why the performers were not only those with yellow skin and slanted eyes, but also those with chocolate skin and wide eyes....

In fact, some argue that Imlek cultural symbols such as the Chinese lucky colour of red, the lion dance and martial arts and Chinese “traditional” instruments like *guzheng* have now become part of Indonesian popular culture, and are learned and performed by not only Chinese but also by *pribumi* (Yuliandani 2006). However, these Chinese “traditional” performances are noticeably different from their original practice in China, as they have been hybridized with local influences (Saputra 2004, 102). Arief Budiman even suggests the adapted Chinese cultural performances in post-Suharto Indonesia be called “Indonesian culture” (cited in “Layar” 2002, 62).

Referring to the commodification of Cajun festivals in Louisiana, Bankston and Henry (2000, 395) argue when an ethnicity becomes a commodity, the line between authentic and inauthentic becomes muddled. Even though the marketable ethnic products may not be historically authentic, their appeal to a larger audience outside the ethnic group itself helps enable the ethnicity to continue to exist. Rather than criticizing the ethnic group as “selling off” its culture, they suggest we should read this as an accommodation of their culture to a post-industrial, post-modern society (ibid, 402). In the Indonesian case,

⁷ Author’s translation.

however, the uncritical essentialist representations of Chineseness in the commodification of Imlek may result in a homogenization and reification of Chineseness.

The increase in consumption of Chinese cultural products by pribumi should not be naïvely read as an acceptance of the ethnic Chinese, just as one can enjoy the food at McDonald's but still disapprove of the United States. Thus, Christine Tjhin (2006) notes that some ethnic Chinese interpret the public manifestations of Imlek as indicating a "rise (or victory) of the Chinese Indonesian". Instead of applauding such a "victory", Tjhin challenged the Chinese "community" not to simply accept the expression of cultural symbols as a "victory" towards gaining recognition. She alerts us to the problems faced by Chinese-Indonesians that are still unresolved, through the following questions: (ibid)

Is it good enough that we have *barongsai* [lion] dancing here and there, while the ethnic relations bill in the parliament's National Legislation Program risks further compartmentalisation of ethnic groups in Indonesia? Is it fulfilling enough that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono celebrates Imlek at a festive gala dinner, while there are still reports of numerous poor Chinese-Indonesians being denied access to birth certificates or identification cards?

Tjhin reminds us that official permission for the public representation of Imlek can be mere "tokenism" (Spivak and Gunew 1986, 138), while "real" issues faced by ethnic Chinese such as discrimination remain largely unaddressed. As long as this remains the case, the commodified public expressions of Imlek as a decorative display of multicultural diversity do not necessarily bring real empowerment to Chinese-Indonesians.

Another Indonesian scholar, Surjadi (2006), has also expressed concern that the overtly accentuated symbols of Imlek could essentialize the representation of Chineseness in Indonesia's public space. He argues that some Chinese in post-Suharto Indonesia strategically appropriated these symbols and aggressively commodified them in order to exhibit the official recognition of Chinese identity and equality in rights (ibid). The side-effect of this has been "an oversimplification or narrow understanding of Chinese culture, in the form of *barongsai* (lion dance), moon cake, *angpau* (cash reward) which are all commercialized and seen as only having entertainment value" (Perkasa 2006). Surjadi (2006) is apprehensive that this ceremonial celebration of Chineseness may lead to an uncritical assumption by the Indonesian public that a process of "resinicization" is underway. Surjadi's concern is indeed valid because the influence of the New Order assimilationist rhetoric on the public discourse of identity is still very strong. This assimilationist ideology conceptualized and expounded identity as an either-or proposition: that is, the more Chinese a person is, the less Indonesian a person becomes, and vice versa. Given this, the uncritical idea of "resinicization" is potentially dangerous as it often encapsulates an essentialist notion of Chineseness that validates the popular myth "Once a Chinese, always a Chinese". The political ramification of this may be to raise doubts about the loyalty of Chinese-Indonesians who have now supposedly become "more Chinese" and thus "less Indonesian". This shows the importance of reconceptualizing identity in non-essentialist terms (Hoon 2008).

An "Invented" Religious Festival

Around the world, Chinese New Year is a cultural celebration. However, in Indonesia, Imlek has been much contested, in part because of the way Confucianism historically evolved in Indonesia. While Chinese elsewhere generally understand Confucianism as a set of ethical rules or as a moral philosophy (see Tu 1996), in Indonesia proponents have presented it as an institutional religion since the early twentieth century. At that time, according to Abalahin (2005, 124), Dutch Protestant missionaries dismissed traditional

Chinese religion as superstition and denied that Confucianism constituted a religion. Reacting to these criticisms and to the need for “religious rationalization” (Coppel 2002, 276-7), Indonesian Confucianists institutionalized their beliefs into an organized religion with a prophet, scriptures, creeds and rituals. Thus Confucius became a prophet who had obtained Heaven’s decree to spread the “gospel” among the Chinese, while Confucian texts (the Four Books and Five Classics) became, in effect, holy scriptures (Coppel 2002, 246- 255). Furthermore, Imlek was co-opted as a religious festival because Confucians claimed it was a sacred day that commemorated the birth of Confucius, just like Christmas celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ.⁸

The appropriateness of treating Confucianism as an organized religion was not uncontested, and was publicly debated in Java in the early 1920s, after the foundation of the *Kong Kauw Hwee* (KKH, the Confucian Religious Society). The historian Charles Coppel (1989) discussed this 1923 debate between the KKH and Chinese secular nationalists over the question “Is Confucianism a religion?”. The nationalists argued that the teachings of Confucius could only give rise to a “learned society”, not to a “church”, and attacked the KKH for advocating blind obedience to selected Confucius teachings. But since the supporters of the KKH themselves were unfamiliar with the Confucian classics and were isolated from new developments in scholarship, they decided that their most powerful defence would be to conflate their version of Confucianism with Chineseness, depicting Chinese who opposed the KKH as having abandoned their identity (Coppel 1989, 134). This one-dimensional construction of identity was always problematic, however, because it lumped together Confucianism as a philosophy and way of life with its religious elements, and hence denied the possibility that a Chinese person might reject the latter while still practise elements of the former.

The idea of Confucianism as an organized religion has assumed unexpected importance in postcolonial Indonesia because the state identifies “Belief in One God” as the first principle in its national ideology (known as Pancasila). According to Abalahin (2005 121), the official discourse of what comprises a religion or *agama* invokes the following criteria: a religion must constitute a way of life for its adherents; teach belief in the existence of the One Supreme God; and have a holy book and be led by a prophet. Religious practices that do not meet these criteria are excluded from the official discourse of *agama* and relegated to the level of *kepercayaan* or beliefs. The New Order administration actively promoted religious affiliation in order to prevent the re-emergence of Communism. Every Indonesian was required to register a religion to which they adhered. However, the New Order government’s attitude toward Chinese religion was ambivalent. In 1965, Confucianism was officially recognized as *agama*, together with Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Balinese Hinduism and Buddhism. However, in 1979, as part of the New Order’s prohibition of Chineseness, the Ministry of Religion stripped the *agama* status from Confucianism and it was designated as a *kepercayaan*, due to its affiliation with China (Abalahin 2005). This forced the Confucians to register as followers of other faiths such as Buddhism (Tjhi 1995, 25). The followers of Confucius were not allowed to celebrate their holy days in public (ibid, 26) and all formal activities related to Confucianism were prohibited. Many Chinese were encouraged to convert to other officially recognized religions so that they might be given “fair” treatment.

It was only in 2000 that the Home Affairs Minister under the Wahid administration abolished the 1979 Ministerial Instruction that de-recognized Confucianism as an official

⁸The Indonesian Confucianists called Imlek “Perayaan Hari Lahir Nabi Khong Cu” or “Celebration of the Prophet Confucius’ Birthday”, according to a MATAKIN magazine, *Genta Harmoni*, 2, 2004: 24. This usage does not appear outside of Indonesia, as any search of websites devoted to Chinese New Year readily shows. Nor do all Chinese-Indonesians make a connection between the Chinese New Year festival and Confucius. For instance, see Chen Lianshan, “*Chun Jie*” [The Spring Festival] (2008).

religion in Indonesia, thereby “restoring” Confucianism as the sixth official religion (Suryadinata 2005, 81). Imlek was first declared a national holiday on the basis of its religious rather than ethnic or cultural character, because only festivals of officially recognized religions can be observed as national holidays in Indonesia. The successor organization to the KKH, MATAKIN (the Supreme Council for the Confucian Religion in Indonesia), which claims more than one million followers, initiated a proposal to request the government recognize Imlek as a national holiday. Other Chinese organizations in Jakarta not only welcomed but supported this proposal by lobbying the government. Since 2000, MATAKIN has organized formal annual Imlek celebrations to which national leaders such as the President and prominent Chinese were invited. These annual celebrations hold significant meanings for many Chinese, who see them as a renewal of government commitment to Chinese religion and culture in Indonesia. However, when I spoke to Junus Jahja, a Chinese Muslim and a leading proponent of assimilation, he was very suspicious of the government’s acceptance of Imlek. He argued that the government’s endorsement of Imlek was initiated by “guilty feelings” after the May 1998 violence. In his words: “The politicians are not sincere when they say they accept Imlek, it is only a vote-winning tactic” (interview, 12/03/2004).

One interesting feature of Imlek in Indonesia is its use of what Confucians claim is a “traditional” Chinese calendar in which an “Imlek year” is counted from the assumed year of Confucius’ birth, or 551 BCE. (Thus, 2009 is calculated as the year of Imlek 2560, i.e. 2009 + 551). The Confucians justify this numeration of the “Imlek year” by comparison to the term Anno Domini (year of the Lord) in the Western calendar, which marks the number of years since the birth of Christ, and to the Muslim Hijrah calendar which calculates its date by reference to the length of time since the Prophet Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina (Tanuwibowo 2004). To maintain this so-called “tradition”, Chinese organizations and Chinese-Indonesian cultural observers have asserted that this calculation traditionally occurred in ancient China, even though historically cyclical Chinese calendars rarely bothered with an epochal starting point and, if they did, the calculation typically began in the reign of the first emperor.⁹ Nevertheless, this supposed association between Imlek and the birth year of Confucius was one of the elements Indonesian Confucians adopted to legitimize Confucianism as an institutional religion, although it was unknown among Chinese communities elsewhere.¹⁰ Indeed, when the distinguished French historian of Indonesian Chinese, Claudine Salmon, discovered this form of dating on an 1887 calendar and 1884 and 1887 commemorative steles that listed donors to the temple of literature in Surabaya, she described it as “an entirely new feature” (Salmon, 2009: 46).¹¹

This supposedly “traditional” calendar is much better understood as a construction or invention by Indonesian-Chinese cultural gate-keepers for their own purposes. Invented “tradition” of this sort needs to be maintained and nourished through constant reminders, e.g. in magazines, newspapers, speeches, sermons etc. To this end, publications by Chinese organizations such as MATAKIN (e.g. *Genta Harmoni*, 2nd edn., 2004; *Buku Kenangan Perayaan Tahun Baru Imlek 2555*), the Indonesian Chinese Social Association (PSMTI) (e.g. Jusuf 2000, 1-6), and Chinese-Indonesian cultural observers (Chou 2001) repeatedly claim that “year of Imlek” calculations are accurate and were practised in ancient, China, despite the lack of any historically valid supporting evidence. Wong’s (2003) comments are relevant for understanding such practices:

⁹ The starting point chosen was either 2637 BCE or 2697 BCE, after which the calendar moved in 60 year cycles. As these dates are 60 years apart, the different is immaterial.

¹⁰ For example, there is no mention of any such connection in the exhaustive study of the traditional Chinese calendar by Henky Janiko Gunawan et al, which is available on-line at: http://www.math.nus.edu.sg/aslaksen/gem-projects/hm/Chinese_Calendar.pdf, accessed 30 September 2009.

¹¹ Salmon originally published her article in French in 1997, but it has been translated for this issue of *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*. Thanks to Nola Cooke for drawing it to my attention.

In immigrant Chinese societies, however, many Chinese immigrants seek to recreate their timeless and authentic China. In taking culture to be an assortment of fragmentary but clearly definable practices and customs, they see the preservation of such cultural essence as a domain that can and needs to be defended against outside intervention.... For the immigrant, these customs became defining moments as they signify, pronounce and declare their being.

While Chinese New Year always contained religious elements, and still does in Taiwan, Singapore and elsewhere, this assertion of a connection between Confucius' birth year and Imlek only exists in Indonesia. This "tradition" undoubtedly arose among acculturated *peranakan* for whom such ideas, and the practices they gave rise to, helped substantiate their own sense of Chineseness. Chinese-educated *totok*, already comfortably Sinic in culture and language, and with ongoing transnational ties to China and other Chinese overseas, would have found such an obscure "tradition" irrelevant or at least unnecessary.

Despite the claims of the Confucians, ethnic Chinese Buddhists, Christians and even Muslims also celebrate Imlek. In their case, however, they regard it as an ethnic and cultural festival, and feel excluded when Confucians try to monopolize it as a religious celebration. However, ironically, some of these groups have also attempted to reinvent their own version of Imlek, more attuned to their own religious and cultural traditions and behaviour. For example, Tri Dharma, a religious organization that practices syncretic Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, disguised under the officially sanctioned "Buddhist religion", published a booklet entitled "Meaning and Purpose of the Imlek New Year". It aimed to inform Chinese and non-Chinese communities of the religious and cultural meaning of Imlek ("Arti" 1984). Its account of the origin of New Year celebrations highlighted Chinese folk religious traditions, including the roles of popular Chinese deities such as the Kitchen God and God of Fortune, among others, making it significantly different from (and more historically accurate than) the Confucian version. In this context it is interesting to note that during the New Order, some ethnic Chinese community leaders, who were Buddhists, attempted to recreate Imlek as a Buddhist festival in order to legitimize its celebration in their temples (Eresen 2001). Because Imlek fell on the same date in the lunar calendar as the birthday of the Buddha Maitreya, they asked for it to be officially recognized as a Buddhist festival. The bid failed, and in 1996, Surjadi Soedirdja, the then Governor of Jakarta, requested ethnic Chinese continue to celebrate New Year privately, stating that Imlek "was not a Buddhist religious festival, but a festival of Chinese tradition or culture, and that it should therefore not be celebrated in Buddhist Viharas or places of worship" (Coppel 2002, 213).

In recent years, it has become a ritual for many ethnic Chinese, whatever their professed religion, to visit Chinese temples to honour their ancestors during Imlek. One such is David Lie, a Chinese Christian, who claims: "Imlek is part of our culture and identity; it is a chance for us to remind ourselves and our children of where we came from" ("Celebrating" 2009). For him, Imlek is a cultural celebration that does not contradict his religion as a Christian. As he further asserts: "I am a devout Christian who goes to church on Sundays. But does that deny me the right to respect my ancestors and preserve their culture? I don't think so" (ibid). The same report in *The Jakarta Post* also includes a story about a Chinese Muslim who visited the temple and made the following comment: "I want my kids to know who their ancestors were. I don't think praying for their souls and remembering why we are here now makes me less of a Muslim". These two accounts show that some ethnic Chinese conflate religious rituals with cultural tradition; they attempt to preserve the latter by performing the former. Nevertheless, to the ethnic actors

themselves, such action is unrelated to religion and is better understood as a performance of identity.

Where Catholicism is concerned, the celebration of Imlek parallels the ways in which Indonesian Catholicism has not hesitated to adapt local or non-Catholic symbols, like the use of Javanese gamelan music, in its liturgy. Thus in one Catholic parish in Jakarta, Imlek was celebrated at Sunday mass: the church was decorated in red, from its carpet to its candles, including the priests' robes, and Chinese songs and dances were performed. In West Kalimantan, Pastor William Chang of Pontianak Catholic Cathedral attempted to relate seven areas of Imlek tradition to the teachings of Jesus in his sermon during a Chinese New Year Mass. The relevant "traditions" that he identified included the cleansing of self, symbolized by the wearing of new clothes during Imlek; holy communion, symbolized by the family feast during Chinese New Year eve; respect towards elders; good deeds in the form of giving alms, symbolized by giving the monetary gift of "angpao"; casting out evils, symbolized by firecrackers; salvation, symbolized by the colour of mandarin fruits; and thanksgiving ("Misa" 2008). This is largely because, as Eves (2007, 104) has noted: "the Catholic Church recognizes cultural differences, legitimises rather than denigrates them and responds to them by creating mechanisms of accommodation or coexistence, for example by co-opting 'other' practices, symbols and rituals".

In contrast to the Catholic Church, Protestant Christian churches have been less receptive to external practices, symbols and rituals. For instance, Rev. Markus Tan, a protestant pastor in Jakarta, published a book entitled "Imlek dan Alkitab" (Imlek and the Bible) to challenge Chinese folk traditions observed during Imlek celebrations and to call for a return to the "tradition of God's kingdom on earth" (Tan 2008). The author was concerned that ethnic Chinese Christians would "return" to religious syncretism when celebrating Imlek, especially if they were to participate in Chinese rituals and practices associated with the festival, such as the temple visit mentioned above (ibid, 23).¹² In the book, the pastor referred to Chinese folk religions as "kepercayaan" (beliefs) rather than "agama" (religion), something that resonates with the State's discourse on religion which juxtaposes agama, which is officially sanctioned and perceived as universal and modern, against kepercayaan, which is regarded as irrational, superstitious, mystical and traditional (Abalahin 2005). In the final chapter of Rev. Tan's book, he states "those of us who have believed are a new creation in Christ" (Tan 2008, 193). To be a *new* creation suggests that a Chinese Christian should abandon *old* practices, namely those folk rituals practised during Imlek. Notwithstanding this view, many Chinese Christian churches still celebrate Imlek as a cultural and ethnic festival by organizing thanksgiving worship services on the first day of Chinese New Year.

Many Chinese Muslims, on the other hand, celebrate Imlek as a cultural tradition, similar to the *adat* (local customs) that indigenous Indonesians observe. In his paper "A Controversy Surrounding Chinese-Indonesian Muslims' Imlek Celebration in Central Java", Chiou (2007) discussed the debate over the celebration of Imlek in the form of "Imlek Salat" (Imlek prayer) at a famous mosque in Yogyakarta organized by PITI (the Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association) in 2007. He noted that a local religious teacher, who proclaimed Imlek was a festival of the Confucian religion, issued a fatwa to prohibit its celebration and the use of Imlek decorations by Chinese Muslims. However, such a view is not shared by all Muslim leaders. Former President Abdurrahman Wahid, for example, called for Chinese Muslims to celebrate Imlek without fear, as he stressed his own Chinese roots and argued that Imlek was not *haram* (prohibited) in Islam (*Kompas*, 30/01/08). In addition to claiming Imlek as the rightful *adat* of Chinese Muslim, Chiou (2007) argued that

¹² The author pointed out that many ethnic Chinese were followers of the syncretised "Three Religions" (Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism) known as the Sam Kauw before converting to Christianity, and that some of them still tolerate such religious syncretism (Tan 2008, 23).

Chinese Muslims also choose to express their ethnic identity in constructing an Islamic Chineseness by building a mosque with Chinese-style architecture in Surabaya, and in organizing a *nashid* (religious chant) band whose members wear Chinese skullcaps and mandarin jackets and chant in Mandarin. All this reveals the agency of Chinese Muslims in expressing their unique version of Islamic religiosity and Chinese identity.

As discussed above, there has been a lot of disapproval among the non-Confucian Chinese over the recognition of Imlek as a religious festival of the Confucians. Given this, one might ask why so many Chinese organizations supported the MATAKIN in its lobbying for the festival to be recognized as religious? The first reason is that Imlek would never have been made a public holiday on cultural or ethnic grounds, because hundreds of other ethnic groups could then have demanded their cultural festivals be treated the same way. Second, Chinese organizations closed ranks behind MATAKIN, refusing to allow internal community differences to undermine its bargaining position, irrespective of whether they agreed that Imlek was a religious festival. Such strategic essentialism of an imagined unified Chinese community is also invoked by Chinese organizations in their struggle against other anti-discrimination laws (see Hoon 2008).

A Contested Festival

The politics of Imlek did not stop at the debate about whether it was a religious or cultural festival. Debates surrounding Imlek also implicate a wider problem related to the new policy of multiculturalism and the old problem of social inequality of wealth. Some Chinese-Indonesians are cautious about the exuberant celebration of Imlek. For instance, Chou (2002) observed Imlek celebrations in Solo in 2002:

There were almost no Chinese-Indonesian citizens that watched [the lion dance parade] in the street. They only watched it from afar, or peeped from behind their doors, or from the windows in the upper floor of their building. There were a few [Chinese] who stood in front of the verandah of their house or shop, but there was no applause, no hand-clapping, no screaming.... At several places, I saw one or two old Chinese who were startled but silent; they were wiping their eyes.

This moving account shows the mixed emotions of some Chinese towards the public celebration of Imlek. Some are still cautious, perhaps due to the trauma they have experienced.

In early 2004 a prominent Catholic Chinese, Harry Tjan Silalahi (2004), was quoted in *Tempo* magazine as saying that “the celebration of Imlek was almost over the limit (*kebablasan*)”. He was concerned that the lavish celebration of Imlek would “disturb” (*mengganggu*) the feelings of Indonesians living in poverty (interview, 08/04/2004). Underlying his concern was a fear that anti-Chinese sentiment—or worse—might be triggered by jealousy. This fear was also shared by a young informant who thought Chinese-Indonesians should tone down their celebration of Imlek. She said: “They (the pribumi) have just started to accept us and so we shouldn’t over act it. We should be careful (*was-was*) and try to be more low-profile (*sederhana*) [in our celebration]” (interview, 25/05/2004). A director of a Chinese-language newspaper in Surabaya summed up his advice about Imlek in a Chinese idiom: “*shi ke er zhi*” (适可而止), meaning “be moderate and stop before reaching the limit” (interview, 18/05/2004). On the first day of Chinese New Year 2009, the editorial page of *The Jakarta Globe* newspaper echoed these views, calling for the Chinese community to celebrate Imlek “with sensitivity and cultural taste” and hoping that “over-the-top displays of wealth will be avoided” (“A Chinese New Year for all to celebrate” 2009). Junus Jahja, an advocate of assimilation, openly expressed his disapproval of the celebration of Imlek: for him, Imlek only stressed differences and

"Imlekisasi" ("Imlek-ization") would ultimately lead to the disintegration of the nation. He added: "Many pribumi friends of mine turn off their TV, especially during Imlek, when Chinese festive TV programs are broadcast. They say, '*Itu lagi, itu lagi! Barongsai lagi, Imlek lagi!*' [That again, that again! Lion dance again, Imlek again!]" (interview, 12/03/2004).

One may argue that these people are too pessimistic about the expression of Imlek or any other "differences" within the developing framework of multiculturalism. However, their caution should not be dismissed out of hand because anti-Chinese sentiment still exists in Indonesia, and can be easily reproduced by perceptions of racially-based inequalities of wealth. In this respect it is worth noting that Arief Budiman also observed that some pribumi perceive that excessive expressions of Chineseness may lead the Chinese to "become arrogant and think they can control this country" (2005, 100). According to him, "some Chinese ... began warning their friends not to go 'overboard' in celebrating their Chineseness. They felt that if the euphoria continued unchecked, it might rekindle latent anti-Chinese feeling" (ibid).

To demonstrate the reality of such sentiments, I reproduce a long excerpt from an interview with a young female pribumi university student:

- Q: What do you think about festive celebrations practised by Chinese, such as the Chinese New Year (Imlek)?
- A: I'd say after Gus Dur (Abdurahman Wahid) was in government, the Chinese were allowed to practise these activities. Ever since, the celebration of Imlek has been very flamboyant. Like in shopping malls, all the decorations are in red. According to me, [the celebration] now is really over the top.
- Q: Do you think it's very over the top?
- A: Very over (*over banget*)! Because the thing is, they are only a small part of Indonesian society but Imlek is celebrated so extravagantly.
- Q: So do you think this is not a very good symptom?
- A: In my opinion, the problem is that they are not original inhabitants (*penduduk asli*). They are from China, aren't they? So it shouldn't be allowed that they dominate this country. I am not willing [to allow this to happen].
- Q: Do you think they have become a part of Indonesia already after living here for so many generations?
- A: They still don't feel [that they have become a part of Indonesia]. Because the fact is that they originate from China (*aslinya mereka dari Cina*). According to me ... the Chinese do not seem to resemble Indonesians [physically]. After all they are still Chinese. I hope Indonesia could have its own character. The Chinese are only a minority. If they want to celebrate [Imlek], there is no need for it to be too glamorous. It has become almost like Idul Fitri. I mean it is extravagant. And there are so many [Imlek] commercials on TV. It's true that many Chinese are still so rich that they can do all that.
- Q: You mentioned the original inhabitants (*penduduk asli*) in Indonesia. In your opinion who are 'asli' Indonesians?
- A: 'Asli' Indonesians are those in our country from the 27 provinces.
- Q: Can the Chinese ever become 'asli' Indonesians?
- A: Of course not. Because they have Chinese descent (*keturunan Cinanya*), don't they? And perhaps they really treasure their ancestor's culture or something like that. They may not acknowledge that. I have a friend who is Chinese but he likes to muck around with pribumi. But his Chinese friends disapprove of him for hanging out with pribumi. They say, 'why do you hang out at Plaza Senayan or those places with many pribumi? Why don't you just hang out in Kota [the Chinatown area]?' There are Chinese who are like that, they stick to their own.

- Q: So in general, have those Chinese who live in Indonesia become real (*seungguhnya*) and full (*seutuhnya*) Indonesian citizens?
- A: It seems like they do not feel as if they have become real Indonesians. Most of them are corrupt—that is why they are rich. They have luxury cars and so on. They feel that they are not part of this country and so they never contribute anything to Indonesians. I mean they only look for more and more profit for themselves, their family and their children. I would say they are very selfish because they do not feel they are a part of Indonesia....If they had the feeling of 'Wow, this is my country', maybe they would want to contribute to the 'little people' (*orang kecil*) from their wealth, especially those successful rich Chinese.
- Q: In your opinion, can Chinese culture be integrated (*dimasukkan*) to the body of Indonesian culture?
- A: I strongly disagree! Why, why does Chinese culture have to be integrated into Indonesian culture? I mean should we integrate Arabic culture as well? Then every other culture would demand to be Indonesian culture. We cannot do that because our country is Indonesia, so our culture has to be Indonesian culture. By Indonesian culture, I mean those traditions like Javanese culture. It is so obvious that Chinese culture and Indonesian culture don't match. We are so observant of manners (*kesopan-santunan*) while they are so money-oriented. Our country is very religious, right? But the Chinese don't care about religion. To them, it's OK to gamble. Oh ya, they also like to drink a lot (07/11/2004).

In this interview, the tertiary-educated respondent has "Othered" Indonesian-Chinese in almost every possible way: in terms of their origin, physical appearance, culture, lifestyle, religion, and class. Firstly, they are perceived as "*pendatang*" (newcomers) who have originated from a land "outside" the boundaries of Indonesian territory. This automatically makes them non-"asli" (non-original) if, as in this interview, "asli" is used to mean autochthonous connection to the land (although ironically the term "asli" has proven to be contested rather than given¹³). Nevertheless, in this informant's essentialist vision of the past, ethnic Chinese were "indelibly linked to the first-generation immigrants and, in an unbroken chain, remain forever aliens" (Aguilar Jr. 2001, 517). Secondly, their physical appearance is assumed to differ from an imagined representation of a phenotypical "Indonesian". Furthermore, the Chinese were seen as practising a different culture: they celebrate Imlek rather than Idul Fitri, and do so in an objectionably extravagant and ostentatious way, according to the respondent; they are money oriented and unrefined; they drink and gamble. The lavish celebrations which, according to the informant, signified their wealth, further "confirmed" their position as the "economically strong". The class position of the Chinese (visible from the cars they drive, for example) is undoubtedly a key marker of difference between them and pribumi generally, and this overriding identity marker homogenizes the class diversity among Chinese collectively in the eyes of an outside observer. In this interview, a "real" Indonesian is basically defined as the opposite of the Chinese-Indonesian Other, being "asli", religious, nationalist, poor, not corrupt, unselfish and not greedy. This interview shows that aged-old historical stereotypes still

¹³ The classification between "asli" and "non-asli" during the New Order was based on "race" and indigeneity, with pribumi being regarded as the "authentic" (asli) inhabitants of the land. The term "asli" was as much an artificial national construct as the term "non-asli". As there are about 300 different ethnic groups that are considered as "asli" in Indonesia, it can be argued that there is no single pribumi identity. In Kalimantan, for instance, the Dayaks see themselves as "asli" in contradistinction to the Madurese, who are more recent immigrants. However, the notion of "asli" has changed after the new Citizenship Law (No. 12/2006) was endorsed by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on 1 August 2006. The Law has redefined "asli Indonesian" to include all citizens who never assumed foreign citizenship of their freewill. This signifies the end to the official distinction between "asli" and "non-asli", as all the citizens are now legally equal before the law (Hoon 2008, 4).

influence the way pribumi can perceive the ethnic Chinese, suggesting that the potential for racial misunderstanding between the two groups is far from over.

Given these sorts of views, some Chinese-Indonesians are justifiably cautious about the exuberant celebration of Imlek. Underlying their concern is the fear that social jealousy might trigger a renewal of the anti-Chinese sentiment that is still alive and well in Indonesia. This antagonism is easily set off by a range of issues, as the case of Imlek 2008 in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, demonstrates. Chinese are the third largest ethnic group in Pontianak, after the Dayak and Malays, but the 2008 Imlek celebration there was low-key. Two days before Imlek the mayor of Pontianak issued Decision No.12/2008, which prohibited the display of fireworks and public performances of dragon and lion dances during the festival. The decision bowed to the demands of the nationalist United Malay Front Movement (Gerakan Barisan Melayu Bersatu), whose hardline anti-Chinese stance had called for a ban on Chinese language and characters in public places. The leader of the Movement, Erwan Irawan, believed lion and dragon dances should not be allowed anywhere in Pontianak because they are not part of "Indonesian culture".¹⁴ This incident again shows the narrowly defined notion of "Indonesianness" and the continuing vulnerability of Chinese-Indonesians.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the complex politics of the Imlek festival in contemporary Indonesia. The festival is a significant ethnic symbol that gives cultural meaning to many Chinese-Indonesians, even if they do not understand the historical origin and cultural meanings of the festival. As Imlek becomes increasingly commercialized, however, some now argue that its cultural symbols are becoming part of the wider popular culture, learned and performed not only by Chinese-Indonesians but also Indonesians of other ethnic backgrounds. This trend may continue, but at present a stronger tendency is more obvious. Certain ethnic Chinese have strategically appropriated these ethnic symbols and have aggressively commodified them, to demonstrate government recognition of Chinese identity and equal status, without seemingly being aware that such commercialization and commodification might focus latent anti-Chinese resentment among the wider Indonesian community. The increased visibility of Chinese cultural products—and their consumption by pribumi Indonesians—should not be naïvely read as heralding a new acceptance of ethnic Chinese: the New Order's assimilationist rhetoric still has a strong influence in Indonesia. The re-emergence of public symbols of Chineseness thus risks being seen by members of the wider Indonesian community through the lens of the old, essentialist notion of Chinese as the alien and untrustworthy 'Other'. Politically, this may cause the loyalty of Chinese-Indonesians to be questioned by pribumi to whom they appear "more Chinese" and thus "less Indonesian". Meanwhile, a focus on the politics of identity and its representations leaves pressing social issues faced by members of the Chinese community largely unresolved.

Harry Tjan Silalahi's 2004 statement describing the celebration of Imlek as "over the limit" raises the issue of what is the "limit" for ethnic Chinese-Indonesians' expression of their Chineseness. Where is this limit? Who decides where it should be set? Is it up to government to dictate limits to cultural expression, or should Chinese-Indonesians themselves exercise discretion? These are not questions exclusively for Chinese-Indonesians to answer, but they epitomise the problems that need to be addressed.

¹⁴ For more on the politics of recent Chinese New Year celebrations in Kalimantan, see Margaret Chan, "Chinese New Year in West Kalimantan: Ritual Theatre and Political Circus" in this issue of *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*.

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